

Commercial outposts slowly build along bike trail to D.C.

Business along the trail

Sunday, May 09, 2004

By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For years on her lunch break, Barbara Harrold strolled through her home town of Confluence in Somerset County and eyed a three-story Victorian house she envisioned turning into a charming bed-and-breakfast.

After a for-sale sign appeared outside the deteriorating structure last year, the Somerset Trust Co. branch manager convinced her husband that they should buy it. And since September, they've spent most evenings and weekends converting it into her dream business.

When it opens this month, Harrold expects to fill the five rooms in the freshly restored 100-year-old Confluence House B&B with hikers, bicyclists and cross-country skiers who pass through the area on the Great Allegheny Passage trail that skirts the town. "When I saw how many hits were on the Confluence tourism Web site for lodging, it was time to put my money where my mouth was," said Harrold, who will continue to manage the bank while her aunt runs the B&B.

Count Harrold among a small but growing number of entrepreneurs in southwestern Pennsylvania who are taking a sizable risk in hopes of cashing in on the growing, but still slow, rails-to-trails movement. Some 140 or so miles of multiuse trails where trains once ran already stretch from Downtown Pittsburgh to Meyersdale and eventually will extend to Cumberland, Md., where they will link with the C&O Canal Towpath to provide an uninterrupted connection all the way to Washington, D.C.

For Confluence and many other long-suffering former industrial towns along the path, the trails offer a chance to inject new life into communities once driven by steel, coal, coke and railroad jobs. B&Bs, restaurants and shops that service bikes and skis might not "revolutionize the economy like a factory with 300 jobs, but when that tourist dollar rattles around in a community, things begin to feel better," said G. Henry Cook, an avid trail biker who also serves as chairman and chief executive of Somerset Trust Co.

His business is making its own significant investments in a couple of trail towns: In 2001, Somerset Trust opened its Confluence branch in a modular unit and is now drawing up plans to build a permanent site on the town square. It plans to add a couple of employees to the five that already work at the branch, which already had exceeded its goal of reaching \$10 million in deposits in five years, when the new building is finished. In 1999, the bank also restored and turned a historic building in Meyersdale, 30 miles away, into a branch.

The Somerset metropolitan region, which includes Somerset and Fayette counties, lost 15,000 coal and steel jobs from the 1960s through 1990, Cook said. "It was devastating; we had to restructure," he said, adding that it helps that there's already an established tourist draw to the area with Ohioyle State Park and its white-water rafting along the trail between Confluence and Connellsville, Fayette County.

Since the rails-to-trails project was completed through West Newton in 1994, the former coal mining center along the Youghiogheny River has seen the addition of two B&Bs, a bike shop and several cafes and delis, said Bob McKinley, trail manager for the Regional Trail Corp. in West Newton. "It's not setting the house on fire but there's definitely economic development," he said.

McKinley, who oversees the portion of the Great Allegheny Passage that runs from Connellsville to McKeesport as well as several other trails in Westmoreland and Fayette counties, said the little towns along the way "are seeing new life. It's not quite a major impact yet but the trail is contributing."

Trail-related businesses may generate only a fraction of the dollars that larger enterprises generate, but tourism and trail officials see long-range potential. A survey by the Allegheny Trail Alliance that tracked trail usage in Western Pennsylvania from April 15 to Nov. 15, 2002, recorded 347,053 visits, with users spending an average \$8.84 apiece on food, beverages, clothing, gas and miscellaneous small items. Add in dollars for bike rentals and other equipment, and overall spending related to the trails totaled \$6.7 million, the survey said.

"We really didn't know what to expect when the trail opened," said Ray Silbaugh, president of the Confluence Tourism Association and an owner of the town's True Value Hardware and Sisters' Cafe, which features bike racks in front and an



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Former Mt. Lebanon resident Pam Metzger, left, talks with Barbara Harrold outside of the house that Harrold is converting to a Bed and Breakfast in the Somerset County town of Confluence. Bike trails that pass through the small town are spurring the growth of small businesses.

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outdoor deck to accommodate customers during peak trail season. "But we've seen an influx of business and we've been pleasantly surprised. We just knew the town had laid asleep long enough."

A Confluence native, Silbaugh worked for Westinghouse Electric Corp.'s defense unit in Baltimore for decades before he took a management buyout in 1994 and returned to his hometown to run his two businesses that help anchor the town square.

Former Mr. Lebanon residents Pam and Bill Metzger, who moved to Confluence two years ago, also have bet their careers on trail-related businesses.

Pam, formerly executive assistant to the president of the Pittsburgh Foundation's William J. Copeland Fund, is administrator for the Keystone Trails Association. Bill is a freelance writer, photographer and map designer who authored the guide book, "The Great Allegheny Passage Companion." The couple works in offices in a renovated building that overlooks the Yough and also contains an antique shop and a used book store.

Pam Metzger is getting ready to launch a concierge company, Allegheny Touring and Trail Services, to arrange accommodations and shuttle rides for trail users. She's targeting families or groups of five or six who want to spend at least a couple of days along the trail.

In one tour, for example, Metzger will meet people in Cumberland, Md., and shuttle them and their bikes in her minivan to Little Orleans, Md., where they can ride along the C&O Canal Towpath. Then she'll transport them to Meyersdale where they can ride to a couple of spots along the Great Allegheny Passage including Confluence and the Victorian town of Dawson.

That package, including overnight stays at B&Bs and guest houses, breakfast and bike transportation, also features a ride on the scenic Western Maryland Railroad between Cumberland and Frostburg. The total package costs from \$450 to \$550 per couple. She's also designing trips of shorter duration between Meyersdale and Pittsburgh that might start around \$350 per couple.

She deliberately does not plan lunches and dinners "because part of the joy of bike touring is stopping in towns along the way and playing it a bit looser instead of saying you have to eat here or there. You can eat fancy or cheap."

Metzger bought a minivan, tapped her savings and arranged bank financing to get the business going. She's confident there will be demand, but "I'm not convinced it's a money-maker."

"What the trail movement is all about is economic development from the grassroots level," said Bill Metzger. "So a couple like us can come in and make an investment in a community ... where the factories and coal mines are gone ... and don't need a big fortune to do it."

Lynn and Gary Santimyer took a similar risk in West Newton when they opened the Scarsdale Cottage Inn in late 2001. The couple frequently rode the trail and thought West Newton showed promise for a B&B because it's about a three-and-a-half hour bike ride from Pittsburgh.

Their inn, an 1890 Victorian home that sleeps 10 to 13, started as a part-time venture. Gary owns a restaurant and catering business in Irwin and Lynn worked as an electrical engineer for a Pittsburgh-area firm until she was laid off last month.

Now she's considering becoming a full-time innkeeper but because she thinks the trail traffic is far below its potential and not what she expected when she opened, she'll have to beef up her marketing efforts to generate more income from the B&B.

"Part of it is that some important pieces of the trail aren't opened yet. And part of it is the lack of services [along the trail]. But once more businesses are in place, which is starting to happen, I think our business will drastically increase."

In Pittsburgh, at the Downtown end of the Eliza Furnace Trail along Second Avenue, Peggy Krall also is waiting for the throngs of customers she expected when she opened Golden Triangle Bike Rentals in 1999.

Business is "not as good as we thought it would be," she said of the shop she operates from spring through fall. It offers bike and in-line skate rentals, bike accessories, repairs, snacks and beverages.

Krall blames sluggish business on a lack of promotion and lack of free parking for trail users. "People don't know where the trails are in Pittsburgh and many say they didn't even know you could bike in Pittsburgh."

Trail-related businesses such as Krall's also suffer in bad weather. "I'm really conscious of that because on a cloudy or cool day, people don't come out."

This season Krall is trying to promote lunch-time deals for Downtown workers such as a \$5-an-hour bike rental. "It's a tough

business. We have income for only six months a year and expenses for 12."

West of Downtown along the Montour Trail, trail officials aren't looking for an influx of commercial businesses. But that portion of the network, which includes about 40 miles of trail from Coraopolis west and south into Washington County, is benefiting from new residential communities that boost trail awareness, said Dennis Pfeiffer, Montour Trail president.

When completed, the Montour Trail should include 47 miles between Coraopolis and Clairton where users can then proceed east along the Yough trails and eventually onto Maryland and the C&O Canal Towpath.

The next big step will be to create a connection between the Montour Trail and Pittsburgh International Airport, Pfeiffer said. "The idea is to advertise internationally so that people can come to the airport, jump on their bike and go all the way to Washington, D.C."

First published on May 9, 2004 at 12:00 am

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